



Commission On Child Protection
State of Connecticut

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SELECT COMMITTEE ON CHILDREN
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Written Testimony of Carolyn Signorelli
Chief Child Protection Attorney & Acting Chair, CTF

Good Morning Senator Musto, Representative Urban and distinguished Committee Members. For the record I am Carolyn Signorelli, Chief Child Protection Attorney with the Commission on Child Protection and Acting Chair of the Children's Trust Fund Council. I thank you for this opportunity to provide testimony in favor of H.B. 5144 and H.B. 6486 and to express concerns regarding S.B. 870.

I am in favor of H.B. 5144 because it is critical that a significant transition of state funds to primary prevention, designed to voluntarily engage families in meeting the challenges of parenthood, creating their own solutions and support network, and avoiding involvement in the child protection system be made now. Our state, our families, another generation of children cannot wait while the leaders in whom they have put their trust expend energy explaining why we can't act to do what is right, to figure out a way to do what makes sense and why we're constrained to continue our pattern of reacting to crisis and failing to rescue too many children from a cycle of poverty, abuse, neglect and lost opportunity to achieve their highest potential.

This bill, by daring to appropriate funds for NFN during this economically challenging time, is an important first step towards true leadership on behalf of struggling parents and the futures of innocent children. NFN has a proven track record

of successful engagement with families who exhibit significant indicators for child abuse and neglect. The voluntary nature of the program fosters a parent's sense of initiative, responsibility for their child's well-being and future success, problem-solving capacity, and sense of security in their community. NFN effectively addresses the risk factors in partnership with the families thereby preventing their situation from deteriorating and avoiding a future investigation by DCF for abuse or neglect.

"Prevention" efforts are the most responsible and cost-effective methods to reduce child neglect and abuse and all its attendant short and long-term costs to our children, families, communities and state. It is responsible because the state is proactive in helping parents be better parents and children avoid the pain of abuse and neglect; cost-effective because of the exponential expense of childhood abuse and neglect in our society.

The Children's Trust Fund is the state agency who researched, designed, evaluated and continues to improve and expand NFN. The Children's Trust Fund from very early on embraced results based accountability to ensure that its programs worked and that state dollars are spent on evidence based practices. As a result, the Nurturing Family Network and the Children's Trust Fund are trusted resources in our communities. Appropriating the funds to CTF will ensure that all the time and effort the agency has taken to earn that trust has not been a wasted undertaking and investment over the course of the last 10 years.

I enthusiastically support this bill and see it as an important step to implementing the critical goals of C.G.S. §§ 4-67t through x. I would therefore respectfully request that this bill be approved.

H.B. 6486 AN ACT CONCERNING RESPONSIBLE FATHERHOOD AND STRONG FAMILIES.

I am also in support of HB 6486, a pilot to work towards engaging fathers in responsible involvement in their children's lives as a parent, and consider what's described in the pilot as a positive means to increasing their engagement.

As the agency that currently provides legal representation to indigent parents who owe child support and who are facing possible incarceration due to contempt, I believe that the current system of threatening or placing parents who have been found indigent in jail until they (or family members) come up with the money to pay a purge, to be logically flawed and ineffectual long term. Ordering individuals who have no education, possibly a criminal record and a history of irresponsible behavior to do job searches to stay out of jail also does not appear to be a long-term solution, especially in this economy.

I think the pilot is appropriate to determine if it can have positive results with fathers already in arrears in their child support, but it may be quite challenging to achieve the results necessary for each child of a father who has impregnated several women and reneged on his support obligations. I think this concept of engagement and support goes hand in hand with the expansion of NFN, as the Children's Trust Fund has also implemented a program to involve fathers early on in the life of their newborn, encouraging them to view their responsibility in a positive light and to be pro-active in taking the necessary steps to support and nurture their children. If programs like this can be expanded through H.B. 5144 it will help to reduce the docket in support court in the future. I also know that CTF would be happy to collaborate with the effort in support court to ensure that the expertise and programs it has already developed be accessed where appropriate for the fathers in this pilot.

I do have concern over the reference to provision of legal counsel in this pilot as my office currently provides legal counsel for parents facing contempt and possible incarceration when they are in arrears on their support. It seems that a program such as this should be seeking to reduce the need for legal counsel and providing an alternative track from contempt and incarceration for dealing with indigent parents. Legal counsel should not be necessary at this point in the process and if it were to be provided it would increase the costs to the state of providing legal representation in child support cases.

H.B. 870 An Act Concerning the Court Appointed Special Advocate Program

I am opposed to this bill as written because it appears in Section 2 (4) to give my agency responsibility for practice, caseload and training standards for all GAL's appointed by the superior court.

Several aspects of the bill need to be clarified in order to understand the extent of my agency's responsibilities under the bill and the fiscal impact upon its budget. It's not clear whether references to GAL's in the bill also include the CASA volunteers, which are also called GAL's in juvenile court. Also, Section 2 (4) appears to apply to all attorney GAL's appointed in juvenile and family matters. Currently GAL's in family cases are appointed directly by the court and the Commission is only responsible to pay for a small percent of indigent representation in these cases. The Judges continue to be responsible for supervising the GAL's in family matters cases.

It would be an incredible expansion of the Commission's responsibilities to render it responsible for caseload, practice and training standards for all GAL's practicing in family court. The Commission is overextended in meeting its obligations in child protection matters.

Currently the Commission is working with the Judicial Branch, specifically Judge Lynda Munro, Chief Administrative Judge of Family Matters on creating and deploying a

training curriculum for GALs and for Attorneys for Minor Children (AMC's). The Commission is prepared to collaborate on that project and support the training initiative in conjunction with Judicial resources. However, it does not have the staff, expertise or funds to take on essentially quality assurance for all GAL's appointed in family matters proceedings. In sum, I am happy to work with the OCA and the Judicial Branch on collaborative efforts for training and qualifying attorneys, but cannot accept full responsibility for quality assurance.

Respectfully Submitted,

Carolyn Signorelli